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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 WARSAW 002101

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PL](#)  
SUBJECT: TUSK COMING ON STRONG, BUT IS IT TOO LITTLE TOO  
LATE?

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Classified By: Political Counselor Mary T. Curtin for reasons 1.4  
(b) and (d)

11. (U) Summary: With polls flip flopping between the ruling Law and Order (PiS) and main opposition Civic Platform (PO), the October 12 debate between PM Kaczynski and PO's Donald Tusk may prove decisive in a tight race. After weeks of running an anemic and lackluster campaign, Tusk came out swinging, and was deemed the winner by virtually all who watched the debate. Instant polls showed a surge for PO, but the race is still tight, and will still come down to turnout, particularly in the cities where PO holds a decisive edge. The Kaczynski electoral machine is humming, but may have lost the momentum in the final stretch of the campaign. PiS strategists nonetheless look to achieve one of their primary goals -- knocking out former coalition partners to their right. Self Defense (SO) and the League of Polish Families (LPR) consistently fall below the parliamentary threshold. End Summary.

Tusk Wins his Debate -- but is it Enough?

12. (C) With a scant six days before Poles elect a new parliament on October 21, the race for first place is a toss up between PiS and PO. Daily polls contradict each other, showing one or the other party edging out the competition by a narrow margin, suggesting the election is a toss up. With turnout key, the PiS electoral machine is operating smoothly, and as reported reftel, the Kaczynski brothers have managed to dominate the race and write the rules of engagement. After two years of non-stop crisis management, the campaign has little to do with their stewardship, and everything to do with the campaign themes they prefer, most notably, stamping out corruption. PO candidates we have talked to despair, admitting that Tusk has run an anemic campaign with poor advisors. They finally got what they hoped for in last Friday's debate. Tusk came out swinging, criticizing PM Kaczynski for an incompetent foreign policy and questioning PiS's economic stewardship. Polls released immediately following the debate showed that Tusk was deemed the victor by a large margin, and PO numbers have ticked up.

13. (C) The question is whether the feisty performance by Tusk in the debate can turn the tide this late in the campaign. The opposition looked strong when parliament voted to dissolve, but has run a positively lackluster campaign. Senior PO officials, including Jaroslaw Gowin, who leads the PO parliamentary list in Krakow, and Slawomir Rybicki, a Tusk confidant who leads the PO list in Olsztyn, have told us they felt that (until the debate) the momentum belonged to PiS, and they feared blowing another election. Sejm candidate

Bozena Bokuwicz told poloff hours before the debate that "Donald always does best when he's a little irritated, and feels provoked." She admitted moreover that PO is under tremendous pressure to be in whatever governing coalition results from next weekend's balloting, preferably in the lead, but even as a junior partner to PiS. If PO fails to lead, Bokuwicz feared, the party was likely to implode.

#### LiD's Fortunes Suffer from Exotic Excess

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¶4. (U) The Left and Democrats (LiD), so badly bruised in 2005, have managed to band together and are showing a little more spirit. Their support has improved since 2005, but does not seem to top the mid-teens. Former President Kwasniewski has not helped after two public incidents in the last two weeks where he appeared to be inebriated at public events. His explanation that he suffered from a relapse of an "exotic illness" contracted in the Philippines some years ago has become instant grist for Polish comedians. Even the LiD mayor of Zielona Gora quipped that his party's leader was "exotically afflicted" when he met poloff on October 12.

¶5. (C) There is a distinct possibility that the results will be largely a replay of the 2005 elections, with urban voters showing lopsided support for PO and rural voters coming out in force for PiS. However, whether it comes in first or second, PiS appears poised to achieve two of its goals for this electoral round, namely killing off the opposition to its right, helping it build PiS as THE conservative party. Neither SO nor LPR have gained any traction, and both consistently poll below the parliamentary threshold of five percent. LPR is fighting back with the first openly anti-war commercial, criticizing Polish leaders for Iraq deployments with images of (Polish) flag-draped caskets. LPR's ad includes images of the Kaczynskis meeting with President Bush and Israeli leaders under a banner of

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"allies," a possible anti-Semitic reference. LPR came under widespread criticism for the advertisement. PiS media spin doctor Adam Bielan said he "hoped the election would finish the party off."

¶6. (C) Comment: The next Sejm may well be split between four parties -- PiS, PO, LiD and the Polish Peasants Party (PSL). The least tortured coalition pairing would be PO and PSL, but any variation is possible, and each variation would have implications for policy issues of concern to the U.S.. If urban voters opt to stay away from the polls, PiS might conceivably achieve an outright majority, but that is a remote possibility, in our estimation. Tusk's last minute effort to infuse his campaign with some energy may help to convince urban voters that it is worth their while to get to the polls. End Comment.

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